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ABSTRACT

A comparison of a highly acclaimed, recent realistic adolescent novel, Richard Peck's "Are You in the House Alone?" with J. M. Barrie's "Peter Pan" yields some surprises. For all its realism of subject matter (including rapes, birth control, and corrupt adults) and its skillful exposition of the traumas of growing up, too often Peck's novel sacrifices moral depth and honesty to simple, cynical reader expectations. The obviously unrealistic and romantic "Peter Pan," however, deals with the same tensions of maturity in more subtle and complex ways. In spite of its strong elements of romantic nostalgia, a careful reading of the book reveals that Barrie does level some profound criticisms at Peter's rejection of the adult world. While Peck's novel is more inclined to recrimination than reconciliation, Barrie manages to balance the real losses of childhood's end against the deep consolations of adulthood. Ultimately Barrie's book grapples more honestly with the moral complexities of life than does Peck's and many other modern "realistic" adolescent novels. Teachers shouldn't let trendy sensationalism distract them from teaching abiding issues. (JL)

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The Quest for Values in Contemporary Adolescent Fiction

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Partisans of the contemporary adolescent novel may be expected to laugh at the notion that J. M. Barrie's Peter Pan (1911) has anything whatsoever to teach us about such novels. The most obvious virtue of the adolescent novel is the determined realism with which it addresses the problems of growing up today; critics have yet to weary of praising its modernity ("a 'now' book, thoroughly contemporary"; "speaks out of now, right now") and sympathy ("remarkable sensitivity and ability to express the problems of troubled youth"; "attempts to speak for all teenagers who find it so hard to communicate with adults"). Unfortunately, most critics have yet to distinguish between the sociological utility and the literary merit of contemporary adolescent fiction. Even the most hidebound of conservative critics--i.e., anyone who refuses to believe that modernity and vulgarity are necessarily the paramount literary virtues--might find it difficult to argue that Barrie's novel also addresses the problems of growing up, and that it does so in a fashion superior to that of much contemporary fiction. After all, Barrie somehow contrives to bring his novel to a close without once mentioning adultery, drug addiction, homosexuality, prostitution, abortion, lesbian gang rape, or even the existential angst of birth control; so he cannot possibly have anything to say to modern adolescents. And Everyone knows that Peter Pan is a sentimental celebration of the freedom and innocence of childhood; everyone, that is, except a few critics who mutter darkly about psychological infantilism and tend to sneer at the novel as a monument to Barrie's own failure to grow up.

Barrie's supporters and detractors should both reread Peter Pan; both camps are likely to find the experience a surprising one. Furthermore, those who teach the adolescent novel are especially likely to profit from

Barrie's story, because it too deals with the price of maturity, and because, despite its lack of ferocious and doctrinaire realism, deals with that price in a way that reveals the chief limitation of much contemporary fiction.

For purposes of illustration, it is useful to compare Peter Pan with one of the most highly-acclaimed of recent adolescent novels, Richard Peck's Are You in the House Alone? (1976). Peck's novel tells the story of Gail Osburne, a teen-age girl whose parents have fled the evils of Manhattan for the bucolic security of Oldfield Village, where Gail is promptly terrorized and raped by Phil Lawver, scion of one of Oldfield's most powerful and respected families. There is a good deal in Peck's novel to justify its critical acclaim. Peck deals sympathetically with adolescent alienation, and does not criticize Gail for "beginning to feel pretty cut off from everybody." His novel recognizes that not all adults are ipso facto villainous--though even his most candid adults are misfits (like Mme Malevich) or temporizers (like Naylor, the sympathetic attorney who advises Gail not to seek legal redress against Phil)--and also that not all adolescents are trustworthy (Phil is Gail's contemporary; Gail's good friend, Alison, is no less determined than Gail's mother to pretend "it never happened"). Peck hints at Gail's limitations while insisting on the shortcomings of her parents and the community ("I felt strangled by the place. Everything so neat and perfectly organized. On the surface."). It is Gail's discovery of what lies beneath the surface that gives the novel its thematic richness In its own way, Gail's story is a kind of mid-seventies Paradise Lost, an account of the loss of innocence; her story is prefaced with an idyllic memory of a moonlight swim with her first love, and ends with Gail confronting a world in which human compromise and human

weakness are the real facts of life ("It could all have been worse. . . . What could we do?" asks Gail's mother at the novel's close).

But Peck's account of the fall of Gail Osburne has its weaknesses too--weaknesses which are typical of so much modern fiction for adolescents. At times Peck cannot resist the temptation to fall into the kind of cliché calculated to appeal to teen-age readers: a contemporary of Gail's "sounds real normal, kind of like a teacher"; Gail wonders "if there's such a thing as a bright spot in a school day"; a typical attempt to talk with her mother "sounded weirdly like my mother practising ventriloquism with me as the dummy." One might benignly ignore such cheap shots as a way of establishing rapport with the reader, but for the fact that they indicate a general shallowness, a glibness which oversimplifies the problems Peck apparently addresses so fearlessly. "The whole point in living in Oldfield Village," Gail informs the reader, "was to play the social game by the rules"--as if this lust for conformity were the sole reason why big-city parents might want to move to a small town. In the obligatory confrontation on the issue of birth-control pills, Gail tells her mother: "You take them. . . . The only difference is that yours are in the medicine cabinet in the bathroom, and I keep mine under my scrapbook in that drawer over there where you must have found them." It is true that Gail's mother is not being candid at this point--but it is also true that candor is not "the only difference" between the two cases. Of course we can accept all this as evidence of Gail's confusion. But a similar--and far more disturbing shallowness is evident in the sweeping assertion that the law protects the rapist instead of the victim because "the law is wrong." There can be no doubt that Gail is the victim of a bitter injustice--but Peck should be able to show this without glibly denouncing the entire legal system and blithely ignoring

the problems involved in seeing that justice is done. In short, the strength of Peck's novel lies in the sympathetic frankness with which it presents the adolescent protagonist and acknowledges her point of view; its weakness lies in its readiness to achieve that sympathy by the sacrifice of complexity, and in its failure to provide an adequate context for its adolescent readers.

What, we may well ask, does Barrie's Peter Pan have in common with Are You in the House Alone", and how can Barrie's novel help us understand the shortcomings of contemporary adolescent fiction? We can only answer these questions by recognizing the novel for what it is, neither a shallow celebration of childhood, nor a sentimental monument to the author's inability to come to terms with his own maturity. There are, it is true, elements of both a celebration of childhood and of compensation for its loss in the novel. Where most of Barrie's critics go awry is in failing to give adequate consideration to the tension between these elements, a tension which lies at the heart of Peter Pan. On the first page of the novel, Mrs Darling asks a rhetorical question of her two-year-old daughter, Wendy: "Why can't you remain like this forever?" The entire novel may usefully be regarded as Barrie's attempt to answer this question.

Barrie's novel resembles Are You in the House Alone? because it deals, however obliquely, with the problems of maturation, and with the loss of innocence which growing up demands. Maturation is frankly acknowledged as a process of loss; of the Neverland, Barrie tells us: "On these magic shores, children at play are for ever beaching their coracles. We too have been there; we can still hear the sound of the surf, though we shall land no more." Adults cannot hope to return to Peter's island, which is not a place but a state of mind, "though if you shut your eyes and are a lucky one you may see at times a shapeless pool of lovely pale colors suspended in the

darkness; then if you squeeze your eyes tighter, the pool begins to take shape and the colors become so vivid that with another squeeze they must go on fire. But just before they go on fire you see the lagoon. This is the nearest you ever get to it on the mainland, just one heavenly moment." We all recognize the lost heavenly land behind the wall of fire; Barrie's subtle invocation of the Garden of Eden guarded by the angel with the sword of fire (Gen. 3.24) tells us that childhood is indeed a type of the lost paradise.

The unreflecting and spontaneous freedom of childhood is incarnate in Peter Pan, the boy who refuses to grow up. Peter has fled the perils and responsibilities which lie in wait for all children. He tells Wendy: "'I ran away the day I was born. . . . It was because I heard father and mother . . . talking about what I was to be when I became a man.' . . . 'I don't want ever to be a man,' he said with passion.' I want always to be a little boy and to have fun. So I ran away. . . .'"

Peter's flight is apparently a success. "Innocent and gay and heartless," Peter "had his first laugh still." Entirely free of the adult's need to calculate, Peter "just said anything that came into his head." Unlike Hook or Mr Darling, Peter need not fret about his social position, for Peter "did not know in the least who or what he was." His freedom from the tyranny of fact is absolute; to him "make-believe and true were exactly the same thing," and he frequently disconcerts the boys who follow him when "in the middle of a fight he would suddenly change sides." The greatest of Peter's blessings--and a significantly mixed blessing Barrie finally shows it to be--is the blessing of forgetfulness. "Peter had seen many tragedies, but he had forgotten them all "--and so Peter does not share the vulnerability of other children. When Hook bites him at a critical moment,

Peter is at first "quite helpless. He could only stare horrified. Every child is affected thus the first time he is treated unfairly. . . . No one ever gets over the first unfairness; no one except Peter. He often met it, but he always forgot it." In short, Pan is, as his name implies, the god of all in Neverland. There he lives in splendid anarchy, exempt from time and memory and remorse, waging a jolly and unending war against the adult world (represented by Hook and the Piccaninny Indians), his every whim gratified.

The sweetness of Peter's life is underscored by the fate which befalls the children who decide to return to the mainland with Wendy: "Before they had attended school a week, they saw what goats they had been not to remain on the island." "It is sad to have to say that the power to fly gradually left them," and sadder yet to see that they also lose the power of belief: "the bearded man who doesn't know any stories to tell his children was once John." Even Wendy, who "grew up of her own free will a day quicker than other girls," cannot hold back her tears when she sees Peter for the last time and must tell him that she has grown up.

So, in all these ways, Barrie reminds us of the cost of maturity. His novel is strongly marked by elements of romance insofar as romance is, as Northrop Frye says in The Anatomy of Criticism, "the nearest of all literary kinds to the wish-fulfilment dream," with its "perenially childlike quality . . . marked by its extraordinarily persistent nostalgia, its search for some kind of imaginative golden age in time or space." The innocent childhood of the hero, Frye continues, is "in later phases . . . often recalled as a lost happy time or Golden Age"--just as Barrie's partisans insist he recalls it in Peter Pan. Yet this romantic view of childhood, influential though it certainly is throughout the novel, does not do full

justice to the complexity of Barrie's thought. That the novel shows elements of romantic nostalgia is obvious; the point of real interest is the context which Barrie provides for these elements.

Despite the persistent romantic misreading of the novel, Peter does not enjoy Barrie's full approval. There is something more than a little sinister in the means Peter must use to maintain his position on the island: "his band were not allowed to know anything he did not know," and when his followers "seem to be growing up, which is against the rules, Peter thins them out." Peter saves Tiger Lily from the pirates by giving "a marvellous imitation" of Hook's voice, and, once the pirate chief has been dispatched to the crocodile, Peter is only too eager to add Hook to his repertoire of roles ("he sat long in the cabin with Hook's cigar-holder in his mouth, and one hand clenched, all but the forefinger, which he bent and held threateningly aloft like a hook.") We note with interest that Peter has bad dreams, a reflection of his isolation ("for hours he could not be separated from these dreams, though he wailed piteously in them"). Furthermore, Peter's emotional growth is frustrated by his decision to remain on the island. (Frye notes that "the archetype of erotic innocence is less commonly marriage than . . . the love of brother for sister.") At the novel's opening, Peter needs Wendy to tell him what a kiss is, and he fails utterly to understand Wendy's maturing interest in him. When Tinker Bell saves Peter's life by drinking the poison left by Hook, the baffled boy can only ask "But Why, Tink?" Peter maintains his freedom and security by forfeiting the possibility of love.

Barrie's awareness of the limitations of perpetual boyhood is also conveyed in his treatment of an adult character who bears a telling relationship to Peter, Mr Darling. Mr Darling is, like Peter, vain and pompous,

given to authoritarianism and the grand gesture (as when, after the children have gone to Neverland, he insists on punishing himself by living in Nana's doghouse). Like Peter, "whatever he did he had to do in excess," and we recognize the echo of Peter in Mr Darling's words to the lost boys when he tells them they can sleep in the drawing-room: "I am not sure that we have a drawing room, but we pretend we have and it's all the same." The man's resemblance to Peter is continually brought home to the reader--Mr Darling "might have passed for a boy again if he had been able to take his baldness off"--and it is through this resemblance that Barrie emphasises the limitations of Peter. What might be considered charming in the boy is beyond doubt foolish in the man. Perpetual boyhood, however pleasant, is not altogether admirable.

Barrie's most profound criticism of the paradisal innocence of childhood is implicit in his summation of children as "innocent and gay and heartless," "the most heartless things in the world." We have seen that Peter's life in Neverland is based on his rejection of the adult world, the world of time and history. He is "the only boy on the island who could neither write nor spell, not the smallest word. He was above all that sort of thing." Since he remains outside time and history, death is meaningless to him. Though he must lose everyone and everything he knows, he need never remember the loss. To Peter death seems only "an awfully big adventure"; therefore he remembers nothing, not even Wendy.

To remember is, in this novel, to be an adult. The memories of the other children are somewhat fluid: Peter's alone is totally unreliable, and, though this saves him much pain, this is also the source of his heartlessness. When Wendy is astonished that Peter does not remember Captain Hook, Peter can say grandly "I forget them after I kill them." But he also

asks "Who is Tinker Bell?" and such insouciance likewise grates when we meet it in other contexts, as in the Spartan epitaph "Mrs Darling was now dead and forgotten." Exempt from time, and its burden of an irrevocable past, Peter is likewise exempt from remorse; as his final meeting with Wendy demonstrates, to be without memory is to be without a heart.

So Peter's heartlessness is a consequence of his rejection of the adult world, a world devoured by time. We sympathize with the adults in Barrie's novel because time takes everything from them, as it does from us, and so makes them like ourselves. Hook is, for this reason, something of a tragic antagonist in the novel. If Peter is the archetypal child, Hook is certainly the archetypal adult, for he is obsessed with time, as grotesquely symbolized by the alarm clock in the crocodile which pursues him to his death. "Terribly alone," cursed with acute self-consciousness and the knowledge of his failure to live up to his ideals, Hook is also obsessed with what he calls "good form," the lost grace and innocence of childhood which Peter cannot help possessing. "A dark and solitary enigma," Hook is in fact fallen man, the maimed prisoner of that world of time which Peter shuns. He, no less than Milton's Satan, carries hell within him--for he is never able to reconcile himself to the loss of bliss that maturity brings. Hook's torment does not make him good--Barrie is not writing <u>that</u> kind of fantasy--but it does make him a candidate for our sympathy in a way that Peter can never be so long as he remains heartless. Barrie--who once remarked that "to be born is to be wrecked on an island"--insists that the heart has a price, a price Peter is unwilling to pay. One can find a heart only by leaving Neverland--and this is the consolation Barrie offers us for the loss of Paradise, for our exile from those magic shores whence "we can still hear the sound of the surf, though we shall land no more." Hook and Mr

Darling, because they cannot leave childhood behind, cannot find hearts. Barrie contends that it is only in the acceptance of time, and of loss, and of the risks of love, that a heart is to be found. Peter Pan, monarch in perpetuity of Neverland, shall be forever free, and forever heartless.

So Barrie's novel is perfectly frank about the fact that childhood is a lost paradise, but he also tells us that it may be a paradise well lost. In this he resembles Milton and the great Romantic poets. Milton's is the greatest treatment of the loss of innocence in English literature, and it ends with a consolation--the promise to Adam of "a paradise within thee, happier far" than the one he has lost. After his meeting with the Ancient Mariner, Coleridge's wedding-guest is "a sadder and a wiser man," his increased awareness bringing him wisdom as well as sorrow. In "Tintern Abbey," the "Intimations" Ode, and throughout The Prelude, Wordsworth laments his "glad animal movements, all gone by" and his loss of "the Paradise where I was rear'd"--but also insists that this loss is essential if one is ever to hear "the still sad music of humanity" and make one's way "through nature to the love of human kind." It is Barrie's sense of the felix culpa, his insistence that one must lose Paradise in order to find love, that balances the nostalgia for childhood in Peter Pan and makes the novel so much richer than its partisans and detractors alike are apt to realize.

An author is, of course, at liberty to present the loss of childhood innocence without any accompanying consolation. This is how Rousseau, for example, presents it in his account of his first meeting with injustice in the Confessions: "From that moment I never again enjoyed pure happiness. . . . We lived as we are told the first man lived in the earthly paradise, but we no longer enjoyed it. . . . No longer were we young people bound by

ties of respect, intimacy and confidence to our guardians; we no longer looked on them as gods who read our hearts; we were less afraid of wrong-doing, and more afraid of being caught; we began to be secretive, to rebel, and to lie." (In his inability to find consolation, Rousseau resembles Hook, or what Hook might have become had he turned to letters instead of the more honest vocation of piracy.) More seriously, we may note that the difference between the English Romantics and Rousseau is very like the difference between Barrie and many writers of adolescent novels today. All stress the loss of childhood innocence, but not all seek to offer the reader such honest consolation as may be found for the loss. In a work which does not provide such consolation, the impulse to criticism and recrimination is dominant, as it is in Rousseau. Peck's Are You in the House Alone?, like its numerous and inferior imitations, is more inclined to recrimination than consolation. It lacks the balance of Barrie's novel. Of course Barrie is writing fantasy, while Peck is writing in the "realistic" mode--but the differences between them go deeper than the choice of mode. Neverland, Barrie tells us, is "a map of a child's mind." For Barrie, fantasy in Peter Pan is a mode of internalization, a way of getting at complex psychological realities (Like the Hausmärchen collected by the brothers Grimm, Barrie's novel is not "realistic" but true.) The argument that he is writing a "realistic" work does not absolve the writer of the obligation to confront the complexity of truth. And yet, the evasion of this complexity is typical of far too much contemporary fiction. To offer adolescent readers, as so many writers today do, little more than a glib confirmation of their suspicion that adults have screwed everything up, and that the world is invariably an unpleasant place, is to cheat those readers. Such fiction encourages, not mature strength, but only snide cynicism. The problem is

one of balance and emphasis, and of providing a context in which the reader can make some sense of human evil and human shortcomings. Only when writers are willing to refrain from a trendy sensationalism and to attempt to grapple honestly with the moral complexities of life (as Barrie, for all his difficulties, grapples in Peter Pan) can they hope to produce the kind of literature that our young people so desperately need.